

The Origins of the Alaska Run for Women

By Terri Pauls

Confirmed by Dan Ellsworth and Lisa Keller

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The idea for the Alaska Run for Women occurred on Mother's Day, May 9, 1993. Anchorage residents Dan Ellsworth and I were reading the Sunday morning Anchorage Daily News over brunch when we noticed the headline of Lew Freedman's column on the front page of the Sports section: "Runners, get mad! Run but don't pay; \$20 is outrageous." It outlined some changes to the 16th annual Alaska Women's Run, which, with 3,400 participants, had become one of the largest women's runs in the country. The entry fee was raised from \$16 to \$20, with no discounts for young girls or seniors. Age group prizes were eliminated. Prizes for overall top finishers were diminished. The t-shirts were changed from long-sleeve to short-sleeve. Freedman called it a "rip-off" and encouraged women to either boycott the event or to run as bandits – runners who don't register and who therefore, with the technology of the time, could screw up results at the finish line. The last line read, "The women who have supported the Women's Run all these years deserve better treatment."

I had never participated in the Alaska Women's Run. I had moved to Anchorage only two years prior, but had an athletic background as a national-level cross-country ski racer. I've also been told that I have "an overdeveloped sense of justice."

Dan had been an active member of the athletic community of Anchorage for about 15 years, both as a participant and a race organizer. He was incensed by Freedman's article. He knew the history of the Alaska Women's Run, and told me of the many ways in which women had felt frustrated and angry with the race organizers over the previous 12 years. Women wondered where their entry fees went, since none of it was given to charity. Race organizers reportedly responded in a disrespectful manner when women made suggestions, such as donating some of the race proceeds back to the community, allowing strollers, or having kids' t-shirts. Many women were miffed by the fact that elite runners were flown in from the lower 48 for the event, but no Alaska runners were flown out to run other races. The race director apparently lavished attention and parties on the out-of-state elite runners while ignoring the local stars. Also, women were not allowed to be part of the decision-making process. The list of complaints went on, and soon I agreed with Dan that something needed to be done – something more productive than boycotting or running as a bandit.

"We should just put on our own race," said Dan, who considers himself more of a feminist than some women are. "My friend Brooks Wade and I could provide an accurate course with accurate timing, but you'd have to do all the rest, because you're the woman." He picked up the phone and called Brooks, who zestfully agreed. His wife Rita chimed in on the idea of an alternative run, "It's about time!"

The Alaska Women's Run was scheduled for Saturday, June 5 – less than a month away. In order to offer a true alternative, and to accommodate the out-of-town women who had already made plans to travel to Anchorage for the June 5 event, we talked about scheduling our run on the same day, at the same time.

But I was not ready to organize this event without further investigation. I wanted to go to the source. So I asked Dan to give me the names of Alaska's top women runners.

Over the next few days, I spoke with about a dozen of them. Most echoed Rita Wade's sentiments, but they didn't want to go ahead with a new run right away; they wanted to meet with the race director of the Alaska Women's Run and talk with him about how that event could benefit women.

So I called the race director, who had heard rumor of an alternative run. He said that most athletic events are not fundraisers, and that he had no desire to donate any proceeds from the run because he and others worked year-round on it and deserved to be paid for their work. I asked if he would be willing to meet with some of the top runners to address some other concerns, but he refused. I told him that he left me no other choice than to go ahead with an alternative run.

Reporting this information back to the top women runners, enthusiasm for an alternative run blossomed. Although a couple of them did not want to get involved in a controversy, most embraced the opportunity to create something better. Judy (Gower) Meisner, Lisa Keller, Gerri Litzenberger, Ruth (Horton) Barndt, Tamaris Dortch, Kathleen Dunbar, and Nancy Pease agreed to have their names listed as supporters in newspaper ads announcing the event. With that level of allegiance from Alaska's top women runners, I committed to organizing the event. We now had only three weeks to go until race day.

But what should I call this event? I thought about “Alaska Run for Women,” but feared legal retaliation if I used a name too similar to the Alaska Women’s Run. So I named the 1993 event the Anchorage Run for Women.

At about that time, I read a letter to the editor written by surgeon Roland Gower. He suggested that if the Alaska Women’s Run was going to increase their entry fee and cut back on perks, they might consider donating some proceeds to fighting breast cancer. That sounded good to me. In fact, Dan and I decided to charge no fee at all for our alternative run, asking only for voluntary donations of any amount to fight breast cancer.

I wanted the Anchorage Run for Women to benefit *all* women, not just those who had already contracted breast cancer. So I asked the American Cancer Society and the National Cancer Institute if I could earmark the money we raised for breast cancer research, in order to *prevent* it in the first place. That was not possible through their organizations, but they referred me to the [Susan G. Komen Foundation](#), which assured me that our proceeds could be earmarked for scientific research on how to prevent or cure breast cancer.

For a logo, I drew a simple, 5-line “swish” design of a woman running. Graphic artist Lori Rodgers made it t-shirt ready as a sponsorship donation. That first year, it served as both logo for ads and brochures, and design for the hot pink tank tops. It remained the business logo of the organization for many years.

In looking for sponsors, I first approached women-owned businesses. Craciun & Associates, attorney Allison Mendel, The Bagel Factory, and the Alaska Women’s Bookstore provided immediate support.

My newspaper ads included my name, phone number, and a request for assistance. Calls poured in. Most enthusiastically offered help and support, but a few voiced opposition. Understandably, some women felt loyal to the Alaska Women’s Run. It was the only athletic event that some women had ever done. For some girls, it launched athletic careers. And some women felt that its spirit of sisterhood was still alive and well. These people urged me not to destroy the 16 year-old institution.

Now, I did not set out to destroy anything. I organized the first Run for Women because it felt like the right thing to do. I saw it as a better, more positive alternative than boycotting the Alaska Women’s Run or running it as a bandit. I was focused on our event, not on the Women’s Run or what might happen after June 5. Maybe we would just make a statement this one year, and effect some positive change in the Women’s Run.

But because we had scheduled the Run for Women for the same time as the Women’s Run, the media picked it up as a conflict. Television cameras pointed fixedly at me as reporters inquired, “Why are you dividing the athletic community of Anchorage by protesting the Alaska Women’s Run?” I never described it as a protest. I responded that we were simply offering an alternative for women who either couldn’t afford or refused to pay the Alaska Women’s Run \$20 entry fee, or wanted their money to go to a good cause. I explained some of the reasons that the community seemed to be at a boiling point of frustration regarding the Women’s Run.

Nonetheless, I felt the heat. I heard that the “dueling races,” as portrayed by the media, had become the talk of the town. Our group of top women runners had been strongly encouraging women – both in person and in the media -- to participate in the Run for Women. “Which race are you running?” apparently triggered some spirited debates. It seemed that half of the athletic community of Anchorage loved me, while the other half hated me. As a 28 year-old with a thin skin, there were mornings when I woke up and wished that the whole thing had been just a bad dream.

My three weeks of race organizing would not have been possible if I had had a normal job at the time. I worked on the run almost every waking hour, taking a one-hour break every day to go for my own run. From obtaining race permits to renting Porta-Potties, from marketing the event to organizing volunteers, I was starting from scratch and was totally immersed.

People came out of the woodwork to offer help with the race. The Anchorage Running Club and the Nordic Ski Association of Anchorage offered to loan their race equipment free of charge. Members of the Arctic Orienteering Club offered to help Dan and Brooks set up the start / finish area at Westchester Lagoon and assist with timing. Greg Cress offered to serve as Chief of Course, which was a 10-kilometer, out-and-back route on the Coastal Trail toward Earthquake Park. Roy Sersa coordinated a group of EMTs to staff aid stations. Ginny Moore served as registrar, Jeni Winegarner organized food and water stations, and Ruth Horton obtained prizes. Karen Jettmar offered to announce. Many others

helped, too. Never before or since has the delegation of tasks been such a breeze for me – everyone was so talented at what they did, and followed through seamlessly.

Judy (Gower) Meisner helped with obtaining insurance, which was a challenge. Most races got it through USA Track & Field, but the USATF representative for Anchorage was also the registrar for the Alaska Women's Run, and she refused to work with us. So Judy found insurance independently.

Lupe Marroquin helped distribute brochures. The two of us were putting them on the cars parked at the Women's Gold Nugget Triathlon when we discovered that the wife of the race director of the Alaska Women's Run was removing them and throwing them on the ground. We joked about reporting her for littering.

Sue Fison came up with the idea of participants wearing signs pinned to the back of their shirts, on which they could write the names of women they knew who had died of breast cancer. She offered to bring all of the materials and organize that piece.

Throughout this entire process, we had no idea if we would succeed. There wasn't time to think about that, anyway. We just kept working.

Our list of sponsors grew as the days passed. Dr. Roland Gower persuaded Alaska Regional Hospital to become our major sponsor by donating \$2000. Other sponsors included Pen Air, Alaska Athletic Club, Heritage Real Estate, Omega Music Center, Pastels Exceptional Hair Design, Heather Flynn, Anne Nevaldine, Sue Walker, Four Seasons Restaurant, The Healing Center, Sylvia Condy, Craciun & Associates, Glen Arts Enterprises, Sue Jarvis (yoga), Alaska Serigraphics, Women of the Wilderness, and Cultural Resource Consultants. Communication Concepts pledged to donate \$5 per minute per runner who finished under 40 minutes.

Nine days before the race, 68 women had entered the Run for Women.

On Friday, June 4 – the day before the race -- the headline of the front page of the Anchorage Daily News read, "Alaska Women's Run hits financial wall." Reporter Natalie Phillips included a pie chart of the race's 1992 expenses: \$24,000 for the race director's salary; \$22,000 for "other salaries, consultant fees;" \$20,900 for "apparel" (race officials received fancy athletic outfits); \$18,700 for "storage rental, equipment," \$11,700 for "office expenses," and \$5700 for "food, travel." Many people were amazed by this plush budget.

The total cash budget for the 1993 Anchorage Run for Women was \$2,610, not including in-kind donations. All work put into the run was unpaid.

Saturday, June 5 dawned perfectly clear. The headline on the front page of the Anchorage Daily News Sports section read, "War of the races: two women's runs duke it out today."

We went into race day with 223 registrations. To our surprise, more than 500 additional women showed up that morning. Our start /finish area was within walking distance of the start of the Alaska Women's Run, up the hill at West High. Numerous entrants of the Women's Run changed their minds at the last minute and ran down the bike path to do the Run for Women instead. Some wore their Women's Run t-shirts inside-out. We had to delay the start by 15 minutes to allow time for everyone to register.

At last, 758 women and girls lined up on the starting line. The gun went off, and the race was on. I nearly collapsed with relief.

36 minutes and 52 seconds later, newcomer Laura Downey crossed the finish line. Kathleen Dunbar placed second in 38:31, and Wendy (Reeves) Spencer was third in 38:43. Spencer, a former cross-country ski national champion who usually avoided running on pavement due to previous knee and ankle injuries, said that "this was worth coming out for" because she had an aunt with breast cancer.

Runners reported that after the 5 km turn-around point, they were cheered by the rest of the field on their way back to Westchester Lagoon.

As more and more women crossed the finish line, the atmosphere became electric. Joy for the event combined with grief of loss from breast cancer, and mixed with that magical sisterhood thing to put a buzz in the air. All tension over competing races disappeared as the gathering turned into a festive celebration.

Top runner Gerri Litzenberger later wrote to me, "Belief gives birth to reality! Thank you for believing! That was one of the greatest events of my life... right up there with childbirth! I cried most of the way!"

Participant donations averaged just under \$20 per person – coincidentally, the same as the entry fee for the Women's Run. Collectively, we raised \$12,000 to send to the Susan G. Komen Foundation to fight breast cancer.

A picnic table served as our awards stand. We awarded the overall race winner and master's division winner free trips to the Race for the Cure – a fundraising run organized by the Susan G. Komen Foundation – in Dallas. We did not have a division for breast cancer survivors in 1993, but got the idea from the Dallas race.

After all of the other prizes were given out, Judy called me up on top of the table. She thanked me for my work in organizing the event, and gave me a bouquet of roses, a card signed by many of the top women runners, and a race tank top that had a quote on the back from the race director of the Women's Run: "Who the hell is Terri Pauls, anyway?!" The audience gave me a standing ovation as tears rolled down my cheeks. I had stood on top of award podiums before as a ski racer, but I learned at that precious moment that the sense of reward derived from individual accomplishment pales in comparison to the fulfillment derived from doing something for an entire community, and being appreciated for it. These women were grateful to me for helping them get their run back. It was one of the best moments of my life.

After a couple of weeks of rest, Dan, Roland, Judy, and I decided to form a non-profit organization. The first meeting of the Anchorage Run for Women Board of Directors took place on July 26, 1993. Members present were Dan Ellsworth, Judy (Gower) Meisner, Roland Gower, Beth Balen, Susan Fison, Jill Gates, Lisa Keller, Charlotte (Krouskop) Tharp, Louise Lazur, Sister Marilee Murphy, Nora Waters, and myself. We agreed to approach the Alaska Women's Run about combining the two events, so that Anchorage could have one women's run that everyone could support. We set goals for the 1994 event for 2000 participants, raising \$50,000 for a beneficiary. There was some discussion around supporting causes other than breast cancer.

The Board of Directors of the Alaska Women's Run dissolved their organization as of August 4, 1993. Participation in their event had fallen from a record 3,448 runners in 1992 to 1,360 finishers in 1993. The discussion about joining forces never happened.

Shortly thereafter, we changed the name of our event to the Alaska Run for Women.

The Susan Komen Foundation asked if the Run for Women would like to become one of their "Races for the Cure," but doing so would have required us to run every decision through them. Holding to the tradition of Alaskan independence, we declined.

I did not participate in planning the 1994 race because months earlier, I had committed to participating in a study abroad program from September through May. When I returned, I felt honored to be asked to fire the starting gun for the 2nd Annual Alaska Run for Women on June 11, 1994.

I served on the board for a year or two before going Outside to graduate school. Over the years, my personal wish has been that the Run fund specific research into the links between synthetic chemicals and breast cancer, with the goal of decreasing the incidence of all forms of cancer. The one time I participated in the run, joined by my mom, the sign on the back of my shirt memorialized Rachel Carson.

Years later, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. And later, stomach cancer. Fortunately, both were caught early and she became a survivor.

1994 Historical Tidbits

Roland Gower served as Chairman of the Board from 1994 - 1998.
Almost 2000 participants

The 1994 route started and finished at the Sullivan Arena, and wound through the streets of Anchorage and the Coastal Trail. 5-mile and 1-mile events were offered.

\$66,656 was raised to fight breast cancer, 1/3 of which was donated to the Susan Komen Foundation.

Sometime after the 1993 race, the signs that women wore on their backs began to include the names of breast cancer survivors, as well as those who had died of the disease.

1995 Historical Tidbits

Nearly 3000 runners & walkers participated, including nearly 100 breast cancer survivors.

Average participant donation: \$16

Event netted \$75,000 in cash and \$20,000 in donations. 70% of money raised went to Alaskan organizations for education, early detection, and programs serving breast cancer survivors, while 30% went to research. Also, mammography services were made available to low-income women.